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SUBJECT: SUNNI KILLINGS IN BASRAH

REF: A) BASRAH 51, B) BASRAH 46, C) BASRAH 26, D) BASRAH 27

BASRAH 00000054 001.2 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Gross, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, REO BASRAH,
DEPARTMENT OF STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Since March 30, 12 high-profile killings of Sunnis have taken place in Basrah. This cable builds on Ref A and discusses targeted killings of Sunnis in Basrah, as well as threats and intimidation campaigns against Sunni and Christian minorities. The local Shia government is at best in denial that Sunnis are increasingly being killed in Basrah; at worst, local police may be complicit in the killings. It is too soon to jump to the conclusion that Sunnis are the victims of a "cleansing campaign" in Basrah. Nevertheless, warning signs exist of a concerted effort to kill off influential Sunnis and drive a significant proportion of the Sunni population out of Basrah. End Summary.

Targeting of Sunnis in Basrah

¶2. (C) Since March 30, 12 high-profile killings of Sunnis have taken place in Basrah. On March 30, a female Sunni lawyer, Maimouna Abdul Karim Hamdani, was shot and killed as she exited a taxi. Maimouna was a well-respected legal advisor to the electricity directorate. On April 3, six members of a Sunni family from the Al Sadoon tribe were shot and killed in the Al Kaddara market in Basrah in the middle of the day. One of the victims was a four-year-old boy. On April 4, one Sunni police officer was killed and another injured. Also on April 4, Sheikh Nawaf Ahmed Al Agrab, a prominent leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), was killed. On April 5, a well-known Sunni professor at Basrah Technical institute, Salah Azeez Hashem, was kidnapped, shot and killed. Also on April 5, a Sunni employee of the health directorate, Jalal Moustafa, was shot and killed. On April 6, Nowfal Jasem Al Agrab, a Sunni sheikh was shot, injured, and reported to have later died of his injuries. On April 7, Sheikh Amar Nadir Othman, a local Sunni imam at the Al Arab mosque, was killed. Thus far, the perpetrators of all of these incidents have not been identified.

¶3. (C) In addition to the high-profile killings, other Sunnis have been killed, shot and injured, and kidnapped. On the evening of April 7, the Sunni Al Asharah Al Mubashera mosque was attacked with mortars and small arms fire. On April 5 and 6, all Sunni mosques in Basrah closed on request of the Basrah Sunni Endowment in protest to the perceived targeting of Sunnis (reftel B). Sunni contacts have shown REO staff threat letters they claim to have received over the past week. They stated that the threat letters were slid under doors and posted at

Sunni mosques. The letters range from threatening death to all Sunnis in general terms to direct threats against the Deputy Head of the Basrah IIP, Dr. Jamal, to telling Sunnis to leave Basrah or be killed. (Comment: REO cannot verify the authenticity of these threat letters. All threat letters turned into the REO thus far have been generic computer-generated documents. However, the preponderance of letters turned in, along with the corroboration of threat letters targeting Sunnis by UN, Danish, and British contacts in Basrah leads us to believe that it is credible that threat letters against Sunnis are being distributed in Basrah. End Comment).

14. (C) The result of the high-profile killings and intimidation campaigns has been to drive a significant number of Sunni families out of Basrah. (Comment: There are no verified numbers of the Sunni population in Basrah, although contacts estimate that the Sunni population in Basrah is around 400,000. We believe that Sunnis make up around 10 percent of Basrah province's population. Other estimates range as high as 25 percent. End Comment). The Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) provided data collected on April 2 to the April 6 International Organization for Migration (IOM) report that puts the number of displaced Sunni families from Basrah in Anbar province alone at 345. (Note: The IOM estimates that each family has six members. End Note.) As per reftel A, Sunni contacts report that many of them plan to depart Basrah during the summer once their children have finished the school year and they can sell off their property. They list northern Iraq, Baghdad, Jordan and Syria as destinations. REO contacts report that the Sunnis who remain in Basrah have begun to group and arm themselves for protection and retaliation. We have been unable to verify the creation of Sunni militias or the arming of Sunnis in general, but, because of the quantities of small arms available in the streets of Basrah and the number of militias in the city, we find the scenario plausible. We will continue to monitor and report on the situation.

The Other Side: Denial or Complicity?

BASRAH 00000054 002.2 OF 003

15. (C) REO Shia contacts uniformly deny the threats and targeted killing of Sunnis in Basrah. In an April 6 Humanitarian Sector Working Group meeting in Basrah, Basrah Provincial Council (BPC) Member and Chair of the Humanitarian Committee Seyid Hasanein Al Safi, a Shia imam, estimated that only about five Sunni families had left Basrah since February 22 because "they felt threatened," denying that any actual threats could have been delivered. Representatives from Badr Organization told REO staff during an April 10 lunch meeting that they had heard about problems with Sunnis in Basrah, but that in reality, Sunnis and Shia cohabited peacefully in the city. The Shia Iraqi Officer in Charge of UNHCR in Basrah said that he was not aware of Sunnis being threatened or targeted in Basrah, although he described the overall situation as "fragile."

16. (C) When confronted with hard numbers of Sunnis killed in the past two weeks, Shia contacts say that security overall in Basrah has deteriorated, and that many murders of both Shia and Sunni have occurred in that timeframe. As for the high-profile Sunni killings, many Shia contacts explain the murders as acts of retribution, either because the victims were former Ba'athists, terrorists, or had family members who were known Ba'athists or terrorists. When asked about the numbers of Sunni families leaving Basrah, Shia officials categorically deny that this number is high and direct attention to the plight of Shia families entering Basrah from the north due to threats and violence perpetrated by Sunnis on Shia.

17. (C) Although we have no hard evidence, contacts report that Iraqi police or people wearing police uniforms were seen carrying out at least some of the high-profile attacks. At the scene of the April 3 murder of the Al Sadoon family, a man wearing an Iraqi police uniform was witnessed leaving the area. With high infiltration of politically affiliated militias into

the Basrah police force, their involvement in the killings, not just against Sunnis, but in the increase in reported murders throughout Basrah, cannot be ruled out.

Christians in Basrah: The Other Minority

¶18. (C) Christians in Basrah appear to be targeted and threatened to a lesser degree than Sunnis. A UN contact reported that Muslim radicals had issued an informal deadline for Christians to depart Basrah, but he was unable to provide further information about the deadline. On April 10, Dr. Juliana Dawood, a well-known Christian professor at Basrah University, told poloff that, as a Christian from Basrah, she felt discriminated against all her life, and that now was no worse than before. Over the past year, she said, she had noticed an increase in the influence of fundamentalist Islam in Basrah. This had resulted, she said, in a number of Christians being attacked and targeted for operating alcohol shops in town. They were targeted not because they were Christian, Dr. Juliana emphasized, but because they sold alcohol.

Other Provinces in the South

¶19. (C) Thus far, there is no evidence to suggest that the targeting of Sunnis extends significantly into Maysan, Dhi Qar, and Muthanna, the other Shia-dominated southern provinces that border Basrah province. The Sunni population of Muthanna number only a few thousand. MoDM figures from April 2 published in the April 8 IOM report, "Displacement Due to Recent Violence," record seven Sunni families originally from Maysan registered in Ana in Anbar and eight Sunni families originally from Dhi Qar in Ramadi and Heet. REO contacts in the three other southern provinces outside Basrah do not report an increase in murders or threats targeting Sunnis.

Comment

¶10. (C) There is a preponderance of evidence suggesting that the Sunni minority in Basrah has been specifically targeted for murders, threats, and kidnappings over the past two weeks. A rise in sectarian violence in general has been noted in Basrah since the February 22 Samarra mosque bombing when the Basrah IIP headquarters was attacked and burned and twelve Sunni detainees (five Iraqis, two Egyptians, two Tunisians, one Libyan, one Saudi, and one Turk) were removed from a Basrah prison and eleven of them executed (Ref C and D). This most recent increase in violence against Sunnis began around the end of March, with the murder of the Sunni female lawyer Maimouna. Notably, the increase in targeting of Sunnis began before the April 6 attack on the Imam Ali mosque in Najaf.

¶11. (C) It is too soon to say that a "cleansing campaign" has been launched against Sunnis in Basrah. Rising sectarian

BASRAH 00000054 003.2 OF 003

violence in Basrah is certainly a problem, but there is as yet no systematic approach by governing officials to eliminate or elicit the departure of Sunnis from the city. Rather, in addition to Sunni-targeted killings and threats, there is increasing distrust from both Shia and Sunni populations in Basrah of the other side, and a growing sense that each group would be better off without the other living in the same area. If reports that Sunnis in Basrah are stockpiling weapons are true, however, a trigger incident that would turn Sunni-Shia sectarian violence into Sunni-Shia sectarian warfare in the region becomes a greater possibility. We will continue to monitor and report on the situation.

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